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COLGATE UNIVERSITY

129th Commencement Exercises

Address by

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE A/CDC/MR

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June eleventh; Nineteen hundred fifty-one

HAMILTON, NEW YORK

President Case, Distinguished Visitors, Members of the Class of 1951:

I am sure I add nothing to your knowledge of life when I observe that it is not an easy thing to know what to say on an occasion like this that will not just constitute a squandering of these few very poignant and unusual moments. I look at the members of the graduating class before me here and try to picture what this hour means to them, sandwiched in as it is between all the hectic pressures of exams and farewells and packing and travel plans, on the one hand, and a new and unaccustomed life on the other. Then I think of people like myself, representing as we do another generation and another experience in life — with our own peculiar pre-occupations and with the incorrigible tendency of older people to dismiss so many of the interests and experiences of younger ones with the light-hearted assumption: Oh, we know all that; we know that it is all vanity and foolishness and that nothing will come of it all. And then I wonder what there could be in my mind that could be useful and meaningful to you at such a time. And it does not make it easier when I think back to my own commencement 26 years ago and realize that I am no longer certain whether there was a commencement speaker at al and, if there was, have not the faintest idea who he was or what he said

There are formidable difficulties, as I think you will admit. Ana the only way I can see to deal with them is the way that one is obliged to deal — as you will shortly discover — with many of life's more bitter difficulties and dilemmas; namely, to become more modest in one's own demands and ambitions. In the present instance, that means not to worry about whether anything said here this morning will be remembered 26 years hence but rather to ask one's self whether there is any brief sequence of thought which might possibly help some of you a little in the immediate problems of adjustment to a life which will be new at least in this respect: That it will now be devoid of the last vestiges of that paternalism and solicitude and guidance which in one degree or another are a part of the entire educational relationship at the undergraduate level.

Now I am aware (this much of my own youth I can remember) that this problem of readjustment is a very wide one. It is more than just meeting the requirements of some job, more than just making one's self agreeable to some boss, more than getting acquainted with neighbors in some new community, more, even than adjusting to the new personal relationships which for most of you will now have to replace in large measure the family relationships into which you were born and the inti-

macies you have enjoyed here in college. The adjustment I am talking about is the adjustment to the totality of all these things and to the country and the society and the time into which you were born. And if I choose to talk about this this morning it is because I think that this particular social and political context into which you are entering is not an easy one for most of you to understand — that it is in fact as compared to the contexts into which most people are born on this earth, a very bewildering one and very difficult to understand, and because, for that reason, I feel concerned for you and almost a little sorry for you when I think of you confronting this task.

As I reflect back on my own experience of a quarter of a century ago, it seems to me that I did a very bad job for a long time in understanding the realities of the life around me. I saw glamor and romance where today I know there were no such things behind the facades of appearances. I saw greatness where there was no greatness. I saw mystery where there was no mystery. And I often failed to see these things where they really were. There seemed to be a certain deceptive quality about appearances in this American life of ours. It was hard to tell which of its phenomena represented new and exciting forces, worth hoping for and dreaming about and attaching yourself to, and which of them represented stuffy and superannuated things, like pompous people who have retained the ability to look impressive and to create the delusion of force and vitality when inside nothing is left but weariness and force of habit and a desire not to be bothered.

And now, you will go forth and you will be confronted with this same necessity of trying to distinguish between the important and the unimportant, the significant and the insignificant; and I think it must prove to be even harder for you than it was for us. Because it seems to me that this puzzling quality of our country stems basically from something — or is at least closely connected with something — that was already existent in the days when we were young but is even more pronounced today; namely the growing gap, as it seems to me, between the national myth and the national reality.

I think most of you know what I mean when I speak of the national myth. You could call it the national *ideal,* if you wish; all these words are crude and shopworn symbols. It is what we like to think we are, when we are at our best. It is what we like other people to think we are. It is something we like to conceive of ourselves as clinging to, or moving toward, even though we sometimes seem to be far away from it.

I see it reflected in certain of our popular images. I see it in Tom Sawyer and the whitewashing of the fence. I see it in the barefoot boy of H. T. Webster's cartoons, with his mongrel dog, his improvised fish pole, and the placid, idyllic, unpolluted stream that provided both the fish and the old swimming hole for the paradise of boyhood. I see it in the legend of the self-made man; the humble beginning, the struggle against natural odds and human competition (though never against bureaucracy or social injustice or the crushing weight of established monopoly). I see it in the image of the village sages assembled around the pot-bellied stove in the cross-roads general store, emitting streams of tobacco juice, punctuated with words of earthy wisdom. I see it in the visions of human achievement and success that emerge from such things as the happy endings of our movies, the cover pictures on our great national magazines, and the prospering family groups in the advertiser's wonderland, with their gleaming smiles, their blooming health, their unmistakable air of having solved the basic problems of existence and discovered the mysterious fountain of happiness.

And out of all this emerges a pattern, a vision, which seems to me to be startlingly and tragically out of tune with the realities of our day; the pattern of an American continent still unspoiled by urbanization and industrialization; of an American life still basically agricultural or small town; of a generosity of space, pervaded by the consciousness of a beckoning, alluring frontier just off there beyond the horizon — wide open spaces promising scope for the adventurous, privacy for the anti-social, escape for the frustrated. I see a world, in other words, in which it was indeed reasonable to suppose that the advance of society might safely be left to flow from the urges and voluntary proclivities of the human individual — in which society could safely lean back and repose its weight on the untrammeled pursuit of individual self-interest, confident that in this world of space and adventure self-interest would draw from the individual mostly those qualities that would make for vigor and confidence and progress in society as a whole, and that if it drew other ones as well, it wouldn't matter; the country could take it. I see a world, in short, in which it was really sufficient to the requirements of social progress and individual self-fulfillment that people should grow and advance from youth to age by the principle of each man for himself — by the triumphs and excitements of independent economic competition with other men and by the development of the personal associations of romantic love and family intimacy that play so huge a part, even the supreme part, in our American scale of values.

And then, with all this in mind, I look around me and ask myself: how many of these things are real and how many are wishful thinking — how many of them represent ideals compatible with the iron necessities of our age and how many of them represent wraiths and memories and the longing for a lost youth and an unrecoverable past. How many boys today still whitewash the village fences? How many unpolluted streams have we really got left? How many general stores have survived at the crossroads? How much is there left in our lives of real country? of the close-knit country community? of simplicity itself? And if much of this is no longer there — or if, to the extent that it is still there, it is obviously a passing and fading pattern — then can we justify ourselves in clinging to it as the image of our national ideal? Are we not in danger of substituting a national nostalgia for a national purpose?

This, my friends of the Class of 1951, is the question mark that hangs like a cloud over our American civilization at this stage of its development, and makes it so inscrutable and its appearances so deceiving. And a great deal hangs by the answer to it. For if our national imagery were really to remain rooted in the peculiar conditions of eighteenth and nineteenth century American life, and never to advance beyond this, it would be an indication, I fear, that our contribution to the advance of civilization had been little more than a flash — though admittedly a loud and spectacular flash — in the pan of world history — that whatever it contained that was original and exciting and promising was only the by-product of this curious experience that earlier American generations enjoyed — the experience of developing a great empty, fertile continent against a somewhat fortuitous background of military and political security: an experience no other people ever quite had before or are ever going to have again, and one therefore largely devoid of relevance to the problems of human life elsewhere on this planet, and even devoid of relevance to most of the problems of our own American future. To put it in another way: the frontier era of American history was a thrilling and colorful and wonderful experience in the life of a nation, but a most unusual one, and unrepeatable; and I would submit that if we are to add a real stone to the edifice of human progress — if we are going to write something into the book of world history that really stands — it will not be the fruit of this strange and esoteric experience of the pioneering past: it will be the fruit of a new pioneering, a pioneering which is largely yet to come, a pioneering whose horizons are within the human spirit itself rather than somewhere out there on the prairies, a pioneering designed to discover how human life can be full and adventurous and

worth living where there is no more unoccupied space, where resources are no longer unlimited, where men are forced to live crowdedly together and an increasing number of problems have to be worked out by painful accommodation between large numbers of people rather than just being left to solve themselves in the crucible of self-interest, and where even technological change has to be recognized as no longer an absolute blessing and the fountain of all good things but as something that has to be carefully steered and controlled if it is not to undermine the very foundations of democracy and freedom.

And when you get out into the stream of adult life you will find a country bewildered by these transitions and in part resentful of them and unwilling to accept them. And you yourselves may be tempted to feel resentful. Some of you already do, I know; and I suppose it is because you sense a great insecurity in your elders — in my generation — and you think we ought to have done better and ought to have thought these things out sooner and dealt with them and given you something firm and reliable and secure to hold onto in life. And I won't argue with you about that, because I don't think our generation has done too well, myself, and that's another story. But there are one or two things I would like to say to you, as to people growing up in this age of change and insecurity; things that may at least help you to keep from arriving at a point where your own children will reproach you even more bitterly than some of you reproach us; and they are these:

First of all, whatever else you do, avoid the psychology of irresponsibility and helplessness and self-pity. I say that particularly to those of you who are veterans or expect soon to be in the armed services, because I have been so shocked and worried over such evidences as I have seen of the state of mind of many of the men in uniform, and I think that to some extent it spreads among the rest of you, too. I don't care how much you may think you are justified in these attitudes; I don't care how sure you are that you are being pushed around, that you are the victims of other people's blunders, that you can't help it, that you "just work here," that the smart guy is the fellow who avoids public service and responsibilty and gets away and feathers his own nest. Suppose it's even true that your elders are making a mess of it and there is no inspiration in them (actually it is less true than you think) — nevertheless, for your own good, you had better not fall into these habits of thought.

Why? I'll tell you why. Because some day, whatever else we do, we, your elders, are going to get old and die off and leave this scene,

and responsibility is going to fall to you, whether you like it or not; and you will not be able any more to go into a corner and complain about the way other people are treating you. The country will be your baby, then, with all its headaches; and you will find that there is no individual salvation outside of its salvation. Circumstance and character will call upon you to carry it along amid that shower of brick-bats and ingratitude and discouragements which is the hallmark of democratic government.

And you will have to do it, because if you don't there will always be people happy to do it in your place, but they will not be people concerned for the preservation of democracy; they will be the dictators; and they will be delighted to relieve you of responsibility at the price of your freedom. And you will assume this burden, I know, because you are Americans and that is the way you will react; but remember, when you do, there will be no one there any more for you to blame if the burden seems heavy and painful and greater than anyone ought to be asked to bear.

Do I do you an injustice with these words? I hope so, and trust so, for I have put them in an extreme form to make my point. If they do not apply to you, skip them. But if they do, think about them.

The second thing I would like to urge is that you not be afraid to have courage — civil courage. That is a curious way to put it; to speak of the *fear* of having courage. But I think that many of our people are actually more courageous at heart than they permit themselves to appear on the surface. We Americans are great conformists. We are self-conscious in each other's company, as citizens. There is a certain civil shyness and timidity that clings to us. We try to keep up with the Joneses. We want the Joneses to think well of us. We tend to shy away from the embarrassments and the awkward angles of participation in community life at the local level. It is one of our national weaknesses.

I urge you to be conscious of this national tendency and to fight it. I am not asking you to fly in the face of the outward conventions; that rarely pays. Those things — the externals — are not important enough to defy. But don't hesitate to go after real evils — and above all the ones that people like to take for granted. And don't ignore them because they seem to lie at the local level. It is here that the establishment of our national self-confidence must start. There is no by-passing the problem of the vigor and success of the local community. And there is no failure as horrible as never to have tried.

Finally, as a concomitant to the overcoming of civil timidity, I ask you to fight its inevitable partner, tolerance. In order that you may have

the courage of your own beliefs and ideas, give the other fellow a chance to have the courage of his. There is nothing more frightening in our country today than the degree to which many people are the slaves of stereotypes and shibboleths, and point the accusing and triumphant finger at other people whenever what they say can be construed as disrespectful to these wooden images, as though this were the conclusive proof of villainy. Only people with a deep sense of doubt about the validity of their own institutions can be so pathologically sensitive to the use of words or phrases which might seem to question their sanctity. This is a matter on which I can appeal to you without the slightest doubt or hesitation. Help us out — help yourselves out — in this most crucial and central of American problems. Help to stamp out this shameful fever of timidity and intolerance which is abroad in our land. Help this country to relax, to let people be different, if they want to; to entertain new ideas. It's not ideas we need be afraid of; it is the fear of ideas that is our real danger.

Now you may say: all right, it's very well for you to urge these things upon us, and we would be glad enough to oblige; but where is the pot of security at the end of this rainbow? Who guarantees our success? How do we make sure that we are not going to be overwhelmed by the disasters of life; that we will not be left destitute and unemployed at some stage; that atomic bombs won't fall on us; that we will not find ourselves tricked and betrayed in the effort to undertake a career, to raise a family, and to work toward an untroubled and contented old age?

My friends, if you put it that way, you are laboring under a misunderstanding; — and this is the burden of my song. That type of security is not in the order of nature. Human life is by definition impermanent and physically insecure. Death comes to each of us in its time; and what is important is perhaps not whether it comes ten years earlier or later but how we use the time before it comes.

There may have been times and generations in which one could at least rely upon a certain stability of life — on certain laws of averages in the recurrence of phenomena — on the solidity and familiarity of certain institutions. Ours is not one of those times. Yet there is a security, I assure you, even in this America of transition, of deceiving appearances, of fading myths and disturbing problems. It is not a security against death or against change or against personal misfortune. It is no longer security by individual effort. It is the security of collaboration with others in the good cause. It is the security of struggle, of danger, of taking chances, the security of the offense as opposed to the defense. He is

secure who has left his personal fears behind him, who has identified himself with the danger and the challenge of his time, and who is in fighting contact with the problems of his society.

The nation as a whole has a problem of outward security with which we are all familiar and which it is not my intention to deal with this morning. But it has another problem of inner security — security against the inadequacies in its own make-up, against the inroads of change and innovation on our nature and tradition. It will not find this security in a wistful enshrinement of the images of the past. It will find it in the bold and confident effort to discover how life can be led with fullness and dignity in a crowded industrialized and urbanized context. And each of you, as individuals, will find his security by his participation in that act of discovery and realization.

At the conclusion of the exercises, Colgate University awarded to Mr. Kennan the degree of Doctor of Civil Law with the following citation by President Everett Case:

GEORGE FROST KENNAN:

Diplomat who mines and refines with indomitable patience the crude and resistant ore of fact, until it yield its grains of hard truth and its occasional nugget of wisdom; scholar who wrestles with the unknown like Jacob with the angel, refusing to let go until you have been blessed; patriot whose spirited exploration of critical frontiers, both political and intellectual, has earned for you a passport needing no visa wherever the human mind is free: by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Trustees of Colgate University I now admit you, *honoris causa ac magna cum laude,* to the degree of Doctor of Civil Law, with whatever of right, of privilege, and of encouragement that title may afford.